



# NEWS

*from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

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## **U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE REAFFIRMS DECISION SUPPORTING COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF DUCK HUNTING SEASON FRAMEWORKS**

The Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has reaffirmed its decision to support a comprehensive national review of duck hunting season frameworks to be conducted by the four flyway councils and the National Flyway Council.

As part of the decision, and in light of public comment, the Service withdrew a proposal published in May to grant six states in the lower Mississippi Flyway an opportunity to extend their duck hunting seasons until January 31.

"We reviewed our decision in light of the strong interest in this issue expressed by state wildlife agencies and some members of Congress, and have decided that the comprehensive review under the auspices of the four flyway councils and the National Flyway Council is the appropriate way to approach the issue of framework dates," said Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark.

"The Service works closely with all the states and the flyway councils in setting waterfowl hunting regulations," Clark said. "If we are going to consider any significant changes, everyone should be involved in the process."

Responding to a request from states located in the lower Mississippi Flyway, the Service, on May 29, announced a proposal to allow Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee the opportunity to extend their fall duck hunting seasons, until January 31, provided that each state opting for the extension agreed to offset the expected additional harvest by shortening the length of its season.

During a public comment period on the proposal, the Service received extensive comment.

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The Service's May 29 proposal was supported by the six southern Mississippi Flyway states, by sportsmen and others in those states, and by the Lower-Region Regulations Committee of the Mississippi Flyway Council.

States and individuals from all four flyways strongly criticized the Service proposal.

Comments from those opposing the proposal centered on three primary objections:

- a perception of inequity because the Service would not be offering other states the option of an extension;
- concern that the flyway councils had no role in developing the proposal and would not have the opportunity to meet and discuss concerns or alternatives before it was finalized;
- and concerns that the Service would not be able to predict the effects of the proposed extensions on harvest or duck populations and guarantee the season-length reduction would be sufficient to completely offset the expected increase in harvest.

The opposing states said further that if changes to framework dates for duck hunting seasons are to be considered, it should be as part of an overall review of frameworks with full participation of all states and flyway councils. The review, they said, should examine both the fairness in duck harvest within and among the flyways and the biological implications of any changes.

The Service reiterated its commitment to working with the flyway councils, the National Flyway Council, and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in launching a complete and cooperative review.

The review process will likely begin this fall, with the goal of developing a consensus recommendation for the regulatory alternatives.

In considering its decision regarding the framework-date issue, the Service recognized that there are other hunting regulations, most notably for blue-winged teal, that must be considered within the context of a comprehensive framework-date review.

Of particular note is the special September duck hunting season currently offered in Iowa. Unlike southern Mississippi Flyway states, which are authorized to allow up to 16 days of teal only hunting in September, Iowa is allowed to hold up to 5 days of its regular duck hunting season in September, with the second segment not to begin prior to October 10. This season has been part of the Continental Management Strategy for almost 20 years. The Iowa September season focuses on providing additional hunting opportunity for lightly-harvested teal, and is a version of special September teal seasons offered to all other Mississippi Flyways states south of Iowa.

The Iowa season does successfully target blue-wing teal, but a review of this season also is warranted in light of the Service's decision to disallow late-season extensions that may increase the harvest of species other than teal.

Ducks and other migratory birds generally migrate along four "flyways" -- the Atlantic, Mississippi, Central and Pacific. The Service, which has responsibility for managing migratory birds under the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act, works cooperatively with the four flyway councils, made up of state representatives, to establish regulatory frameworks on season length, framework dates, and bag limits for waterfowl hunting seasons. The flyway councils make formal recommendations to the Service each summer, but the Service has the ultimate authority to set the frameworks. States choose their seasons and bag limits within the frameworks authorized by the Service.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprising more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations.

The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.